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ABSTRACT

The Country Women's Association (CWA) is a nationwide Australian group that started in the 1920s in response to isolated women's need to socialize. The group's activities have expanded greatly over time. It distributes essential food and clothing to needy rural families, and its extensive involvement in incidental education for women includes cultural pursuits such as drama, choirs, floral art, and handicrafts. CWA uses its network to disseminate craft training, teaching a woman from each district at a central school each year, who then teaches members in her own area. Outreach teams go to the Pacific Islands or Aboriginal lands, at the invitation of the women themselves, to expand women's abilities and horizons. The usual requests are for sewing, basic hygiene, and cooking skills. Members are trained in conducting formal meetings, parliamentary procedure, accounting and record keeping, leadership skills, reporting, and publicity and public speaking. CWA is active in state and national politics. The nonsectarian, nonpartisan nature of the group has helped it gain credibility, and its lobbying efforts have been quite successful, especially in areas of youth, health, infrastructure, and rural education. Each year the group studies a different country as an international project, encouraging members to expand their horizons. Community education is carried out through annual projects called state objectives. A subject, such as cystic fibrosis, is chosen from nominations around the state and becomes the fundraising focus for the year. CWA also administers a scholarship for young people who need financial assistance in continuing their education or for mature women who are retraining. (TD)

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Incidental Education (for Women) in Rural Communities

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South Australian Country Women's Association

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Incidental Education (for Women) in Rural Communities

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Thank you for this opportunity of sharing in your celebration of Rural Education.
If I had to choose five priorities in my life, CWA and Education would be two, so the chance to talk about both at once is a real pleasure. Please feel free to make this session interactive, and raise questions as we go along if you wish.

For you to choose this workshop, you must have some ideas about CWA. (contact through family, or living in rural areas) What do you think of?? Don Dunstan called us the "blue rinse brigade" in the seventies. We do have a lamingtons, tea and scones image, but I hope that I can add another dimension for you, in the next half an hour.

CWA had its origins in the 20's with the need for isolated women to socialise, when their whole life revolved around housework and child-rearing. Mary Warnes, living on a sheep station out of Burra, used a bicycle to meet her sister from another station, once a month. They lived 30 miles apart, and pedalled to meet halfway. From their discussions, the first CWA was formed in SA, and Burra branch has celebrated its 70th anniversary. This was NOT a senior citizens organisation, although people may see it that way now. It was started by young women, although it attracted a wide range of ages in its membership. When I joined 30 years ago, many young mothers were involved, and I attended meetings with three pre-school little boys in tow. We have some very enthusiastic, active younger members, although a minority.

Only a few years after its inception, CWA became a network for distributing essential food and clothing parcels to desperately needy rural families during the depression. This occurred again recently during the rural crisis, when funds from benevolent institutions were channelled through CWA, during 95/96, supplementing our normal confidential Emergency Aid activities. (e g. Our baby parcels are extremely popular with social workers or any D o N who finds a mother has no means of providing clothing to take her baby home from hospital. The parcels are valued at $120 each, and include handknitted garments and toys and rugs donated by members, as well as nappies, jump suits, singlets and toiletries. (Av one per week, but 60 in thelast 6 months). Also 60 emergency aid applications in the same time frame, to a value of $9 800, to men and women, urban and rural recipients, for one-off payments, eg car registration, phone or power bills, funeral expenses, house fire victims etc.

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Less well known, are the successful lobbying activities carried out at State and National levels By constitution, we are non-sectarian and non- party political. This has led to credibility with Governments of all colours, and the CWA has accumulated an enormous amount of political clout, to the extent that a State delegation is never refused an audience by the Premier. (We don't abuse the privilege for trivial matters.)

CWA is often asked to submit grass roots opinions to policy makers, particularly at Federal level, because of our unique national network of 50 000 members. A prime example was the survey carried out in the early 80's, through CWA members across Australia, at the request of the Office of the Status of Women in Canberra, which showed that the single thing rural women wanted the most was better roads - - hence Bob Hawke's Bi-centennial roads projects.

Closer to home, the new Youth Offenders policies were first promoted in a basic form, at a CWA State Conference about ten years ago, after members heard a youth worker speak. With repeated submissions over time, the powers that be began to think that they had thought of it all by themselves, and eventually put it into legislation. More recently, the CWA was very active in motivating community opinion on the threatened closure of the Cadell training centre. One member has almost made it her life's work to lobby for the new bridge across the Murray at Berri After 20 years she has seen her hopes about to be realised. I believe she may have an official invitation to the opening, and I hope she gets to drive across that bridge before she dies, as she is now quite elderly.

The CWA is particularly conscious of any issues relating to Health, prepared to respond immediately to any threat to rural services, such as GP's not delivering babies in country areas, or the threatened closure of many country hospitals, which we managed to curtail several years ago, by spirited opposition.

We also have a watching brief for Education, taking a keen interest in Austudy entitlements, RICE, REVISE, Isolated Children and Parents Association, distance education, training by open learning, school bus issues , support for schools in rural areas, etc. When short term contracts were first introduced, members were horrified at what they saw happening both to the young teachers and to the classes, subjected to a lot of instability, and took a submission to the Minister of Education. We were given a good hearing, and while it would be simplistic

of me to say changes were solely due to that representation, we feel sure that we had some influence in improving the conditions for contract teachers in the country, soon after.

This year CWA was invited to respond to the draft policy on Child Safety on Farms, with input to the final document. To recognise National Safety Week from July 21st, many branches are planning to donate Giddy Goanna books to local school libraries, as a gesture to alert children and staff to the need for safety awareness , particularly when visiting farms.

With that background, it conveniently brings me around to incidental education within rural communities by CWA.. During World War II, members were extremely busy with the war effort. You may have heard of them catering for the troop trains travelling north, at Terowie, Hawker and Quorn. The army supplied the pots and pans, but did you realise that the CWA cooked and supplied the ingredients, with the help of primary producers and carriers around the state? Apart from making and packing comfort parcels for servicemen and women overseas, the CWA was the official maker of camouflage nets - something I did not realise until the Australia Remembers celebrations. Anyway after all that was over, the servicemen needed the jobs, and the women went back to their kitchens. New avenues were needed for women's energies.

Once fuel became available, and travel possible, the incidental education of women really began. Cultural pursuits blossomed, with drama groups, choirs, and floral art and handicraft activities becoming popular. Because of the decline in rural population over the last 15 -20 years, many branches no longer have the membership to support drama groups and choirs, but during their hey-day, many women gained valuable skills while participating, by performing in public, and improved their confidence and self esteem in the process - an essential part of education, the basis of further extension and development

The teaching of traditional needlework techniques and handicrafts has continued apace. It has been suggested that CWA has helped to keep many of these skills alive. The Spinners group was active early in the organisation, fifty years ago, about thirty years before homespun once again became popular, and handspinning became a fashionable pastime. Embroidery is now enjoying a huge comeback and CWA has a pool of experienced tutors available to share the skills. Teaching handicrafts has been so successful because of the way CWA used its network to disseminate training. A woman from each district is taught two or three crafts at a central school in Adelaide every year, and then returns to teach members in her own area

during the next twelve months. A new set of crafts is taught the following year. With most towns having a local craft outlet these days, some women have been able to create small businesses for themselves, selling their work.

Outreach Resource teams go to the Pacific Islands or Aboriginal lands, at the invitation of women themselves -expanding women's abilities and horizons. The usual requests are for sewing skills, health (basic hygiene) and cookery.

CWA trains members in conducting a formal meeting, using correct meeting procedure, and maintaining accurate and efficient records, such as simple accounting and accurate minutes.(Trained tutors have been teaching branch treasurers in new systems this year.) For those who are interested, leadership training and tuition in public speaking is available. In two weeks, I will be back here for a president and secretary's school, which I think is booked out, followed by a publicity and reporting workshop. Women have gone into local government and other positions of community responsibility from their background in CWA.

Of course not all women wish to venture out of their comfortable niche, but within meetings, women are encouraged to participate. Even something as simple as a prepared roll call topic can be a challenge to a timid member. Quite recently, I heard of an incident where a woman who had lived a very isolated lifestyle, joined CWA after her husband retired. Her social experience was so limited that the group needed to guide her into participating in a common party game. The obvious change created in her life made me stop and think. How many women`s lives have been enriched by their involvement in CWA over the 70 year period? How many new skills have been gained, How many controversial topics discussed or new ideas floated?

I believe we should not underestimate the difference CWA has made within communities, over the years, to many isolated rural women. I know the men joke about fritz for tea the night after the CWA meeting, and I have known some very selfish men who refused to let their wives join the "chinwaggers", but I believe those women, their menfolk and perhaps the community as a whole are the poorer.

Another simple thing we do is study a different country each year as an international project, encouraging members to look further than their own back door. It is good to see women develop, and learn to express their opinions and have confidence within a group. Considering

the limited opportunities many of them had for education and training, until the fifties, CWA was a vehicle which assisted many women to test the new freedom which came with affluence. Although we were too conservative for the Womens Libbers, in our own way we helped women extend themselves. (personal example)When Daylight Saving was introduced, we took a submission to David Tonkin. Living on Eyre Peninsula as a young Mum with small children, I found daylight saving very difficult for them and me, and was asked to prepare material and join the delegation - certainly a learning experience for me.

Another way in which we deliberately try to educate the community, is through annual projects which we call State Objectives. A worthwhile subject is chosen from those nominated around the state, and this becomes the fundraising focus for the year.

Last year the topic was lymphoedema,(gross swelling of the limbs) and the aim was to raise enough money to purchase a perometer, a highly technical but portable piece of medical equipment made in Germany. This enables the doctor to quickly and accurately measure the patient's limbs, and compare with previous records, so enhancing the management of the condition. Many patients have been told to go home and live with it, but recent research indicates that although at present the condition is incurable, it is largely preventable, and can be managed successfully, if patients are educated. While raising nearly $27 000, we also raised community awareness about possible treatment.

On Eyre Peninsula, we took Professor Piller to four conferences, in one week, and after he had spoken to the members at each venue, we arranged for him to speak with local health professionals and lymphoedema patients at various hospitals. The feedback was tremendous, and people can't wait for him to get back with the machine (the first in Australia, by the way)

Other objectives have been cystic fibrosis, before it became as high profile as it is now, patient controlled analgesic devices for major intensive care units, a kidney dialysis machine for Pt Augusta, and the bus for Julia Farr Centre patients. In each case, public awareness of the need has been increased and the information about the particular condition has been distributed.

The State Objective this year is our Dorothy Dolling Memorial Trust Scholarships. This money is available to young women or men who are having financial difficulty continuing or completing their studies, or for mature women who are re-training. This year we had 20 applicants, and were able to award $200 each. Previously the amount has been $300, but the

drop in interest rates has affected this, and we are aiming to raise money to enlarge the capital

Recently I was in Wadlata Outback centre, and noticed an early model transceiver (I think it was the original Pt Augusta base set, but don't quote me.) On looking closer, I saw that the engraved plate said it had been donated by the CWA. It quite moved me to think that they were doing it then, as we are doing it now - at the vanguard, caring for both the health and education of people in remote rural areas.